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TAGS: PREL PGOV RS
SUBJECT: ACTING U/S FRIED'S MEETING WITH DFM KARASIN

REF: MOSCOW 725

Classified By: William J. Burns for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary: In a lively and wide-ranging March 17 meeting with Acting U/S Fried, DFM Karasin underscored the depth of Russian opposition to the "explosive Kosovo precedent" and NATO MAP for Ukraine and Georgia. Karasin claimed that public opinion in Russia toward the U.S. had sharpened and there was now strong domestic support for a tough GOR response to Kosovo MAP, citing the March 13 Duma special hearing on the frozen conflicts as the latest evidence. Karasin warned that the U.S. faced a "strategic choice" on what kind of Russia it wanted to deal with. Fried acknowledged the fundamental differences over Kosovo and the current public mood in Russia, but told Karasin that consistently inflamed, negative GOR and government-controlled media statements about the aims of NATO were largely responsible. Fried urged Russia to send clear signals to Serbia that Russia condemns Serbian-instigated violence in Kosovo. On MAP, Fried addressed each of Russia's key arguments, underscoring U.S. refusal to consign countries to Russia's "sphere of influence." Fried also raised concerns about possible Russian plans to resume military cooperation with Abkhazia, addressed Russian concerns about Russia-Ukraine ties and U.S. sanctions against Belarus, and expressed support for Karasin's upcoming trip to Yerevan. End summary.

¶2. On March 17, the eve of the 2 2 meetings in Moscow, Acting U/S Daniel Fried, EUR DAS David Kramer, and NSC Senior Director for Russia Mary Warlick engaged in a lively two-hour discussion with Deputy Foreign Minister Karasin on a wide range of issues.

Kosovo CDI: A Bombshell in Russian Society

¶3. (C) Karasin reviewed the results of the March 13 State Duma special hearing on the future status of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria, stressing that the "explosive Kosovo precedent," followed by the possibility that Georgia and Ukraine could be given MAP at NATO Summit in Bucharest, had qualitatively changed the public opinion in Russia in favor of strong action from the GOR. Echoing the points he made in his March 14 conversation with the Ambassador (reftel), Karasin argued that the GOR is facing strong domestic pressure to recognize the unresolved territories in Georgia and Moldova. Karasin added that Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria have more reason to be recognized than Kosovo - in contrast to Kosovo, these republics have de facto independent governments with relatively functioning political and economic policies. Karasin charged that the effects of Kosovo will be felt for many years to come.

¶4. (C) On March 17, the MFA issued a statement clearly attributing the cause of the March 17 violence in Mitrovitsa

and escalating tension "the unilateral declaration of independence and the unacceptance of this illegitimate act by Kosovo Serbs." The MFA called on the international presence in the region to exercise restraint and to work strictly within the framework of the UNSCR 1244, noting that the only path to "normalization is the return of the Kosovo process to the international legal framework."

¶15. (C) Fried acknowledged the fundamental differences between the U.S. and Europe and Russia over Kosovo, and noted that the Ambassador has accurately conveyed to Washington the depth of Russian feelings about Kosovo and other issues. Fried agreed that it would have been better if the status of Kosovo was determined through the UNSC, but stressed that Russia, and not the West, blocked this path.

¶16. (C) Fried highlighted the danger of the Serbian government, particularly the radicals in the government, misinterpreting Russia's political support for Serbia's position on Kosovo as a license to instigate more violence in Kosovo. He noted that there had not been a single Albanian-instigated incident since Kosovo CDI; the latest clashes had all been Serbian-instigated. Fried told Karasin that the U.S. was pushing the Serbs to behave responsibly and urged Russia to send similar messages.

¶17. (C) Fried also rejected Karasin's claim that Kosovo is a precedent for the resolution of other unresolved conflicts and said that the U.S. would not accept demands that Kosovo be treated as such. Karasin only responded that the debate over whether Kosovo is a precedent was only for academics and diplomats; "simple people" will insist that if the international community recognized Kosovo, the other unresolved territories should be recognized as well. He reaffirmed that Russia would maintain its "principled" position on Kosovo, as it is "the correct position and the only one that upholds international law."

NATO MAP: Another Bombshell

¶18. (C) Turning to the possibility of NATO MAP for Ukraine and Georgia, Karasin said that Kosovo was only the "tip of the iceberg." He stated that even if MAP was not offered to the two countries at Bucharest, "sooner or later," they would accede to the security block. Karasin argued that Russia's political elite firmly believes that the accession of Ukraine and Georgia represented a direct security threat to Russia.

¶19. (C) Karasin asserted that the U.S. and NATO had to choose "what kind of Russia" that it wanted to deal with -- "a Russia that is stable and ready to calmly discuss issues with the U.S., Europe and China, or one that is deeply concerned and filled with nervousness." He then framed the issue another way by asking whether the goal of the U.S. and NATO was to "push all the former Soviet countries, including Belarus, into NATO in an effort to isolate Russia or make the rational and realistic choice of allowing these countries to "remain free" and engage both with the West and Russia." Karasin argued that the international community had reached a crossroads and "the future" in many ways depends on the strategic choice that the U.S. makes.

¶10. (C) Fried noted that Secretaries Rice and Gates looked forward to discussing this understandably sensitive issue with President Putin and President-elect Medvedev. Addressing each of Karasin's arguments, Fried agreed that governments have to respond to public opinion, but stressed that governments are also responsible for shaping public opinion, and numerous statements from senior Russian officials and the state-controlled media about the "hostile" aims of NATO fed into the public unease over NATO enlargement. Fried advised that the GOR should focus more energy on stressing the positive aspects of NATO-Russia partnership and taking more concrete action to strengthen that partnership.

¶11. (C) On the issue of the "inevitability" of NATO

membership for Georgia and Ukraine, Fried cautioned Russia about getting ahead of itself. Fried explained that both countries have made progress on the requirements for NATO membership, but Ukraine and Georgia still had a lot of work ahead of them. On Ukraine, Fried agreed with Karasin that there was a lack of consensus in the society on the issue, but stressed that MAP did not mean membership. Moreover, the offer of MAP would most likely prompt the kind of national debate needed in Ukraine. Kramer added that he was struck by Russia's newfound concern for Ukraine's democracy, and reinforced the point that the offer of MAP does not hinge on the holding of a referendum or other form of national debate. Kramer also advised Russia not to view MAP as the automatic severance of "the obviously close and multifaceted ties" between Russia and Ukraine, including in the military and cultural spheres.

¶12. (C) Fried said Georgia's case was different, as there is clearly a consensus in Georgian society on NATO membership, but he pointed out that Georgia had some work to do to qualify, although he noted that he was more confident in the leadership than he was two years ago. Fried told Karasin that he was not sure of the outcome of Bucharest, and at best, there was a "50/50 chance" Ukraine and Georgia would be offered MAP.

¶13. (C) Regardless of the results of Bucharest, Fried underscored that U.S. position on MAP is clear: the U.S. refuses to categorize countries as those belonging to Russia's sphere of influence. Ukraine and Georgia are sovereign, democratic countries, and it is up these countries -- not the U.S. or Russia -- to determine their future. Referring to Karasin's questions about the choice that the U.S. has to make about the kind of relationship it wants to have with Russia, Fried stated in unambiguous terms that the U.S. will not "buy" its partnership with Russia by denying the aspirations of new democracies in the former Soviet space. Fried also pointed out that Russia's thinly veiled threats of "dire consequences" for Ukraine and Georgia only strengthened these countries' resolve to seek NATO membership. Kramer added that these countries approached the Alliance about MAP, not the other way around, and that no country including Russia, gets to veto the decisions of sovereign governments and the choice of the Alliance.

¶14. (C) Fried also told Karasin that Russia should not fear NATO and possible enlargement, noting that because of NATO's acceptance of Russia's neighbors to the West, Russia's border has never been safer. Despite Russia's gloomy predictions several years ago, the accession of Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary did not lead to instability in the region or problems for Russia.

¶15. (C) Karasin closed the discussion on NATO MAP by noting that he believed NATO was a partner and not Russia's enemy, but reiterated the GOR position that when NATO keeps expanding to its border, Russia's national and strategic interests are put in jeopardy. He added that Russia is also a sovereign country, but, "unlike some countries," it takes into account the interests of its partners and neighbors before making critical decisions.

Bilateral Relations with Ukraine

¶16. (C) Karasin noted that the gas dispute with Ukraine had been settled in principle and that Russia was genuinely interested in stronger relations with Ukraine, but he expressed concern that Ukraine's "complicated internal situation" had led to the search for a national idea "at the expense of nationalism." He listed well-known Russian complaints about Ukraine's "revision of history" regarding events in World War II and the recent law in Ukraine banning foreign films not dubbed into the Ukrainian language.

Belarus

¶17. (C) Karasin reiterated his concerns about the decision of the Treasury Department to apply sanctions against Belarus oil monopoly Belneftekhim when Lukashenko regime had taken a number of steps towards democratic reform, including the release of some political prisoners. Karasin asked for an explanation of the U.S. action, stressing that he was not advocating on behalf of the Lukashenko regime, but advising that the U.S. should "widen the field of discussion" with Lukashenko

¶18. (C) Fried said that Lukashenko missed an ideal opportunity to release the remaining identified political prisoner Anotoliy Kozulin when his wife died last month. He and Kramer pointed out that such a move would have allowed Lukashenko to "look magnanimous," turned off the sanctions against Belneftekhim, and would have prompted the U.S. to engage in a serious political dialogue with the regime. Kramer provided further explanation, noting that the Belarusian Presidential Administration had given clear signals to the U.S. that Kozulin was going to be released in mid-February, but several weeks passed and there was no action. Thus, the decision was made to go ahead with the sanctions against Belneftekhim. Kramer said that the Belarusians were most likely confused by the March 6 public announcement from Treasury to proceed with the decision already adopted in November 2007; the March 6 announcement did not signify additional sanctions against the oil monopoly.

Abkhazia

¶19. (C) Fried said he did not understand the Russian move to lift CIS sanctions against Abkhazia, underscoring that if Russia plans to sell arms to the Abkhaz, how can it expect to continue its role as a neutral mediator and peacekeeper. Fried also expressed concern over the timing of the move, given that Russia and Georgia had only recently began to put bilateral relations back on track.

¶20. (C) Karasin maintained that Russia intended to maintain the momentum for improved bilateral relations, and noted that the GOR was prepared to resume air and postal links, and remove the restrictions on visas. Karasin added that Putin advised Saakashvili of Russia's intention to lift CIS sanctions, stressing that Russia saw that the key condition for the lifting of the sanctions -- the return of Georgian refugees to Abkhazia -- had "mostly" been addressed. Finally, Karasin acknowledged that the lifting of the sanctions was meant to send a signal to Georgia that Russia "will not sit idly" while the Georgians "stalled" on political settlement talks with Abkhazia. Karasin noted that he understood the Georgian Parliament would soon hold a special hearing similar to the March 13 Duma hearing on frozen conflicts, stressing that such a forum could "exacerbate the situation."

¶21. (C) Fried assured Karasin that the U.S. has been clear in its message to all parties, including the Georgians, to refrain from military provocations, and noted Secretary Rice's recent meeting with Georgian Speaker of Parliament Burjunadze in Bucharest. Fried underscored the importance of Russia sending similar messages to the Abkhaz, noting U.S. concern that Abkhazia could misinterpret Russia's political message as a signal to provoke conflict with Georgia.

¶22. (C) When asked about his recent conversation with Duma International Relations Committee Chair Kosachev in Brussels, Kramer said Kosachev told him that the Duma would most likely not recommend recognition of Abkhazia if NATO offered Georgia MAP, but would do so if and when Georgia was offered membership. Slightly embarrassed, Karasin only replied that Kosachev was being "too categorical."

Transnistria

¶23. (C) Karasin said Russia continued to pressure President

Voronin and "President" Smirnov to engage directly, stressing that Russia was not trying to promote a "secret deal" with either party. Karasin agreed with Kramer that Smirnov was willing to talk to Voronin, but Voronin was not interested in according Transnistria the status of equal negotiating partner and thus unwilling to speak to Smirnov under such a condition.

¶24. (C) When Karasin argued that "we wouldn't be in this situation" if the Kozak Memorandum had been put into motion in 2003, Fried pushed back, arguing that the issue of Russian troops in Moldova was not only jamming up the Transnistria settlement, but also the CFE talks. Fried said the U.S. was trying to pressure the Moldovans and Georgians to be more flexible on the parallel actions plan for CFE, but noted that Russia should only expect so much from either country when the GOR is simultaneously applying strong pressure on them both.

Armenia

¶25. (C) Karasin informed Fried that he was traveling to Yerevan on March 18 to engage in talks with President Kocharian and President-elect Sarkisian in an effort to restore stability in the country. Karasin said his message to the Armenians was to be "more flexible with the other political forces." Fried agreed with Russia's approach, noting that that was the essence of the U.S. message to the Armenians. When Karasin asked about EUR DAS Matthew Bryza's recent statements critical of the actions of the Kocharian government, Fried said that the U.S. had to send Kocharian a signal that the its initially restrained position should in no way be interpreted as a license to behave irresponsibly. Fried expressed some optimism that Sarkisian will want to take office with the unrest largely behind him, and thus might be willing to apply pressure on Kocharian to reach a peaceful compromise.

¶26. (C) Karasin and Fried closed the meeting by agreeing that the united position of the Minsk Group on Azerbaijan's recent UN General Assembly resolution on the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh represented a clear example of the positive effects of U.S.-Russia bilateral cooperation.

¶27. (U) This message was cleared by Acting U/S Fried.
BURNS